
What's the big deal?

Alcohol and certain types of drugs are mood-altering (psychoactive). They affect the central nervous system (mainly the brain) and our ability to work safely. Workplace hazards and accidents are often the result of the use of alcohol and other mood-altering drugs. It's not just the "high" that causes a problem; hangovers from alcohol and withdrawal from certain drugs can be just as serious as the mood-altering effect. This is an Occupational Health and Safety issue of due diligence and liability, as well as safety.

Why are we addressing this issue?

Health and Safety legislation says **employers** are responsible for the health, safety, and welfare of employees. **Employers** must minimize or eliminate all safety risks that have the potential to harm employees. **Employees** also have responsibilities. **Employees** have a duty to work safely and free from impairment, and to report unsafe working conditions – which may include their own impairment/use or that of a co-worker.

What substances are we talking about?

Central Nervous System depressants slow down the body's reactions to thinking and judgment, as well as breathing and heart rate. Depressants include:

Alcohol

- Effects depend on age, gender, body weight, previous experience with alcohol, how much food is in the stomach, and other drugs (legal or illegal) taken at the same time.
- Effects vary depending on how much has been taken over what period of time.
- Hangovers are caused partly by a chemical that's produced when alcohol is processed by the liver. A person with a hangover is not able to work safely.

Prescription drugs such as:

- Sedative benzodiazepines (Valium™, Xanax™, Restoril™, Ativan™...)
- Narcotics (morphine, codeine, oxycodone, Dilaudid™...),

Any of these drugs taken together are particularly dangerous. Taken alone or in combination, even small doses affect reaction time, how quickly the mind processes what's happening, coordination and critical thinking.

Prescription drugs may also be abused by using a medication:

- prescribed for someone else
- amount greater than prescribed or recommended
- in a manner other than prescribed (e.g. injecting contents of a pill meant to be taken orally)
- in combination with alcohol (extremely dangerous: breathing and heart rate are lowered significantly)

Central Nervous System stimulants speed up the body's functions and include:

- Cocaine
- Methamphetamine (including ecstasy)
- Prescr. stimulants (Ritalin™, Dexedrine™, Adderall™)

Substances like caffeine and nicotine also speed up the body's functions, but they do not impair our judgment, coordination, decision-making or reaction time; they do increase our heart rate and other bodily functions and can affect our ability to work safely.

Cannabis products (marijuana, pot, weed, reefer, hash, hash oil) may:

- cause drowsiness or restlessness (depends on amount taken and individual response)
- impair depth perception
- decrease attention span and concentration
- slow reaction time
- decrease muscle strength and hand steadiness
- affect thinking and short-term memory
- affect our ability to assess potentially dangerous or critical risk situations, and to make good decisions regarding safety

Any one or all of these effects reduce our ability to drive and to perform work tasks safely.

Concentrations of cannabis today are on average 300-400% stronger than that of the 70s and 80s. Contrary to popular belief, individuals can be addicted to cannabis, and many of the effects on our brain are long term. These effects of cannabis can last for weeks, months and even years after stopping use.

Why use?

Many people use alcohol and other mood-altering drugs as an accepted part of workplace or community culture, believing that no harm will result. Alcohol and drugs are used as:

- **a coping mechanism**
- **to escape problems**
- **to avoid or deal with stress**
- **to "numb out"**
- **to deal with pain**
- **to "mellow out"**
- **to get "high"**
- **to fit in**

**The bottom line:
Why do you think
they call it dope?**

When does use become a problem?

Use becomes a problem when a substance is taken and a person:

- drives
- gets “high” on the job
- comes to work high or with a hangover (from drugs and/or alcohol), or
- experiences negative effects on their daily activity due to drug or alcohol use.

It’s often stated that what a person does on their own time is their own business, and that’s true. However, when an individual’s drug and/or alcohol use carries over into the workplace and affects an individual’s safety and the safety of co-workers, then it is definitely a problem and the employer’s business.

There is a difference between the ability to work and the ability to work safely.

What is “Enabling” and how does it fuel the problem?

“Enabling” is the idea, feeling, attitude, behaviour or action that unintentionally allows or reinforces a person’s drug or alcohol use. It’s sometimes said that “enabling” is doing all the wrong things for the right reasons. Family members often do not recognize there is a problem and may “cover up” or attempt to control the person’s actions, therefore “enabling” the problem use to continue and worsen. Co-workers also often “enable” by covering up, taking on extra duties or work, and making excuses for the problem or behaviour. Captains and supervisors “enable” employees when they do not believe that it is their responsibility to take action.

Why take action now?

There is a growing trend in Canada where employers are pro-actively addressing health and safety concerns related to employee drug and/or alcohol use. This starts with education and awareness. In the past, looking the other way has resulted in many injuries and deaths related to substance abuse. It is well known that there has been and continues to be a problem with drugs and alcohol in the fishing industry. Many employers and owners are now addressing substance abuse in the workplace. Doing nothing is no longer an option.

Resources for Help and Treatment

Department of Health & Wellness Addictions
Program Website: novascotia.ca/dhw/addictions
NS Health 24-hour Crisis Line: 1-888-429-8167

Contact your local Health Authority

Halifax/Dartmouth: 1-866-340-6700

South Shore: 902-543-5400 or Lunenburg Detox:
902-634-7325

South West Nova: 902-875-4200 or Yarmouth detox:
1-877-742-2406

Annapolis Valley: 902-679-2392

Colchester: 902-893-4776

East Hants: 902-883-0295

Cumberland: 902-667-7094

Pictou: 902-485-4335

Antigonish /Cape Breton: 1-888-291-3535

Crosbie House, Private/Residential Care
(24/7): 1-866-681-0613 (free to call and talk)

Nadine Wentzell Consulting Inc.

Assistance with Workplace Programs and Strategies
Bedford, NS: 902-444-3636



**Fisheries Safety
Association
OF NOVA SCOTIA**



Drug & Alcohol Awareness

Drugs and Alcohol in the Workplace
Affect Safety – On and Off the Water.